

I'm going to let you in on a little secret. I wasn't always the person I am today. Shocker, right? But seriously, when I was in grade school, I was one of the quietest, most shy people you ever met. In many ways I was the quintessential nerd. Good grades in school, nose buried in books, quiet and unassuming. Of course, that also meant being a target for bullies. And I still remember what my parents told me about those bullies. "Don't let them get to you, someday they'll be working for you." I'm sure many parents over the years have repeated variations on that theme. The idea is a simple one: everyone gets what's coming to them. The bullies who don't try hard in school will reap what they sow with miserable lives and low-paying jobs. Those who work hard and apply themselves will be rewarded with success and happiness.

And hey, even if it's not entirely true, it's a nice little platitude for the kids to hold onto that will get them through the rougher spots of their childhood. What is sort of unusual though, is that this same sort of platitude seems to be exactly what Paul is giving to us through his letter to the Thessalonians today: <Read text: 2 Th 1:5-10>.

Just before this, Paul had been describing some of the trials and persecutions that the Thessalonians were going through. And now he seems to tell them that the fact that they're getting picked on is proof that they're on the right side. To be persecuted for having the true faith is evidence that you are part of the faith. The end result is that you will be rescued from this at the end. You will be given relief from your troubles and those who don't know God, those who don't follow the gospel of Jesus...they will be punished and repaid for their crimes.

This is the day we are observing here, the day that Paul is talking about. The last and final judgment. We know that on that day the truth will be revealed. Those who are judged worthy will take their place in heaven with all the saints in the new heavens and the new earth. They will be with their God forever in comfort everlasting. And those that worked against God, those who hated him and hurt his children...it will not be a good day for them. When they see Christ descending in fire, they're going to know right away what that means for them. And it is going to be terrifying. When they stand before the judge all the harm they've done to God will be laid out for all to see and then they will be judged accordingly. They will see the error of their ways, but not in time for them to do anything about it. All that will be left is the terror of knowing their fate. They will know everlasting destruction. They will be cut off from God and his mercy. In short, quid pro quo, they will get what's coming to them. Whereas we, the faithful, will be welcomed by our God with open arms.

And we know what the determining factor is in this judgment. It's not all about deeds and actions. Those of us who will be brought to heaven will not be brought there because we are the best. We're not going to be brought there because we never did anything to offend God or hurt the people around us. We're not going to be let into heaven because we're more special than the rest or because we've gone above and beyond the call of duty in our lives of service. No, the only consideration that will get us into God's kingdom is simply whether or not we trust him to bring us there on the merit of Christ's blood. The blood of the lamb, shed for us, covers our sins and our imperfections. On our own, even the best we could do for God is still stained with selfish sin. Nothing we have to offer him is acceptable. So it cannot be our own merits, it has to be accomplished by God alone. By faith we take hold of the promises of God to free us from our sins by his blood and by faith we are declared not guilty. This is how we will be judged innocent and worthy of eternal life. Not by our doing, but by Christ's doing.

However, those who stand apart from Christ will be judged on their own merits. These are the ones who hate God and his people, who attack them, sometimes without even realizing it. They are the ones who defiantly live contrary to God's will and brazenly sin in the daylight. They will be judged on their actions. The old saying "if you're not for us, you're against us," might be a little extreme in most situations but it is literally true when it comes to allegiance to God. There is no neutral ground. If someone does not have a heart of faith, a heart of love for God, then they have a heart of hatred. And it is that heart of hatred that they will be judged on. The God of the universe will not condemn them arbitrarily on the last day, they will fall based on their own actions. Their lives were used to offend and attack God and his people and so they will get what they have coming to them.

Now, is there maybe something unsatisfying to you as you think about that? A little unsettling maybe? Where's the satisfaction of seeing the playground bully get his? Of seeing the one who harmed others get what he deserves? It doesn't feel quite the same, does it? There's a reason for that. A few reasons actually.

For one, this isn't some slap on the wrist designed to get someone to learn their lesson and become a better person out of it. That's discipline, that's learning. What happens to these people on the last day is judgment, it is punishment. And it is permanent. But after all they've done, why would we care about that? Why do we not want to see people who

attack God and his followers get what they deserve forever? Why would we rather they come around and learn the truth? Because *being* a Christian means having a heart of love just like our God has for us. And that heart of love stays in balance with his justice, just like we talked about last week. It means a heart like Jesus' heart who fell to his knees in tears over Jerusalem, wanting to help them, to gather them up but they rejected him.

And part of that heart of love is the understanding that unlike the bully on the playground versus the innocent bystander, we are not innocent in this situation. We are *exactly like* those who persecute God and the church, the only difference is that we have been convinced of the truth. Our actions, our hearts are no different than those that attack God outwardly. Even in our renewed state we frequently break our God's commands and have to return to him begging for forgiveness. We are no different than the bullies in this situation and literally there but for the grace of God go we. So do we really want everyone to receive exactly what they deserve? Do we really want every crime to go punished by the person who committed it? Because that would mean opening ourselves up for a whole lot of trouble. If we're going to start talking about everyone getting what's coming to them, we need to start with ourselves.

And so for all this, the final judgment just isn't as satisfying as seeing the bully finally get their comeuppance from someone bigger than them. As Christians, with a heart of love for our God, we would rather see them saved. We would rather they see the error of their ways and be rescued right alongside of us.

At least, in theory.

The problem we run into is when the injustice is personal. It's easy, in theory, to want someone forgiven and saved from a nebulous mass of "sin". But when the attack was personal, when it was against what we hold dear, then it becomes cloudy for us. On one level we might still want them saved. But not without a little bit of suffering to make up for it. They should be punish a bit and then they can be let in. Or, if the attack was severe enough, we might go full-blown Jonah on the matter? Remember Jonah? Yeah, belly of the whale guy. He ran away from preaching destruction to the pagan city of Nineveh. Because he was afraid? Yes, but not because he was afraid of the Ninevites. He was afraid they would *listen* and repent! He was afraid that God would relent and *not* destroy them. He wanted them destroyed for being enemies of God, he didn't want them to see any kind of mercy.

And when we let our sinful nature get the better of us, that is sometimes how we end up feeling about our enemies. We can start to make internal judgments of our own about who is worthy to be saved and who isn't. And we withhold the message of truth because we actually want to see someone punished for their crimes. But we have to remember that it goes both ways. You may not consider it fair that a person be allowed to be forgiven and just "get away" with everything they've done...but what about you?

Now, that's all well and good, but what about that innate sense of justice we all have? How do we satisfy it properly to allow love to prevail in these situations? By understanding the truth about actions that harm us. There are two things we need to remember when the world hurts us. First, the crime committed was not ultimately directed against us, but against God. Don't allow it to become personal, but understand that sins are all against God himself. David, looking back on his affair with Bathsheeba and murder of Uriah said quite plainly to God, "Against you and you only have I sinned." God is the injured party and God is the authority. Leave justice to him. You and I have committed crimes against that same God, so we actually have something in common with those that harm us.

Secondly, understand the divine control of our God. All things work together for the good of those who love him. That means that whatever attack you endure, God *allowed* it to happen for the benefit of his kingdom. As such, it is a hidden blessing, no matter how it appears on the outside. Understand that this action may not have been done at God's will, but it was God's will to use it to help you or those around you. Keep the divine perspective, that even our interactions with each other are really about our interactions with God.

So just like God found a way to let love balance out justice, do the same in your life. Embrace the love that God has given you in rescuing you from eternal death. Look forward with confidence to the judgment that will be handed down to you on the last day, one of "not guilty". And then, with the urgency of knowing it could come any moment, do whatever you can to help others face that judgment with confidence. Don't withhold God's grace or pass early judgment on those who might have hurt you, but leave justice to God. He will punish those who have done wrong and have no defense. But do everything you can to let his love balance justice in your own life so that we reach out and save as many as possible before the judgment is final. Amen.